7 questions you should be asking about brand journalism

It might seem the same as content marketing, but there are key differences.
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By Jim Ylisela

We meet a lot of communicators who want to transform themselves into brand journalists and their organizations into prominent industry publishers.

And why wouldn’t they? Brand journalism turns order takers into storytellers, engaging audiences (including employees) with dynamic, relevant, useful content. Besides, brand journalism is a lot more fun than churning out boring press releases, drab web copy and mind-numbing white papers.

It’s also a lot more work.

Brand journalism isn’t a training event, or a campaign. If you take the plunge, you’re committing to a fundamental change in the way you plan, produce and deliver content. You’re also sending a strong message to those in your organization who tend to see the communications department as a 24-hour diner, ready to serve reliable but uninspired sustenance at a moment’s notice.

With those dramatic shifts, there are bound to be questions. Here are the seven we hear most often; the answers can help you chart your own course and prepare for what happens next.

1. Brand journalism or content marketing?

Some would say the terms are interchangeable. Others claim they’re worlds apart. The big difference, from our point of view, is one of purpose. Content marketing is geared toward making a sale, generating a lead and increasing demand for a product or service.

The emphasis is on the marketing, and the content offers a good way in.

Brand journalism is about raising awareness and providing context, by showcasing your expertise, enhancing your reputation and being the “chief explainer” for your industry.
The emphasis is on the journalism: Get my attention with a good headline, tell me a compelling story, and make me think—or even act.

Which is right? Either. Both. What’s not to like about generating sales leads, if that’s your aim? And who would argue against storytelling that positions your organization as the “go-to” place for industry news, opinion pieces and insights?

We embrace brand journalism because it offers a third way to reach audiences, working in sync with traditional PR and marketing. Just avoid calling it brand journalism. It confuses the bosses and makes them nervous. As one rather lathered-up senior VP told me years ago, when I was pushing for more compelling headlines (yeah, just better headlines):

“You know, we’re not The New York Times!”

Whatever.

2. Should I build my news platform on my main website (on a revamped online newsroom), or on a separate site?

This is the question we hear more than any other, and the short, immensely unsatisfying answer is that it depends on certain key factors. We’ve built and worked on news platforms that are part of the main site (your so-called mothership), and we’ve built them on separate platforms, most typically on WordPress.

Here are the arguments on both sides:

**Keep it on the mothership.** The strongest argument for this approach is that you presumably have lots of traffic already coming to your site, which means you’ve established a connection with an audience predisposed to like your soon-to-be fabulous content. You
can re-make your online newsroom, adding storytelling to the mix of press releases and media contacts. Your IT department can build it and provide support.

**Build it on a separate site.** All the reasons cited above can go terribly wrong. You’d be beholden to your IT folks, and despite their best intentions, your needs may fall to 237th on their never-ending lists of tasks. You have to control your content and be able to post whenever you choose, even on a tight deadline. Your website might be in a state of flux (most are), and the new version won’t go live for three years. And mixing brand journalism with press releases or marketing content sends a mixed message that could hurt your credibility.

So which way should you go? Make a decision based on your circumstances—and timing. If you’re about to upgrade or reinvent your website, this might be the perfect time to add a brand journalism newsroom. If not, build a separate site that you control, with plenty of teasers on the mothership to bring people to your stories.

There’s a lot of hand-wringing about this, but your audience doesn’t care. (They’re probably getting to your stories through social media sites and email newsfeeds, using their phones.) Make it easy, make it quick and deliver the goods.

**3. We think we’re already doing brand journalism. Are we?**

You might be, and if you are, Mazel Tov!

But too often, we find that content intended to be brand journalism is content marketing or press releases in disguise. Here’s what to look for:

1. **It’s all about you.** PR and marketing content is, understandably, about you. Hey, everyone, look at us and how great we are! We’re the leading this and the cutting-edge that. Have you seen our latest product?
There’s a place for that, but not in brand journalism. Instead, tell the story the way a reporter would, and let your organization and your expertise come through naturally. Which often means later in the story, not in the headline or lead paragraph.

2. And speaking of headlines. This is the easiest way to test your brandjo-ness. If the name of your organization shows up in every headline, you’re not doing brand journalism. Headlines that are boring and self-serving? Nope. Not brandjo.

Headlines are your best shot at clicks; they should sell your story, not your company.

3. Images. Visuals are the best way to get a reader to stop and consider. It’s why every Facebook post is visual today, in hopes that a compelling image will slow down all those hyperactive thumbs.

Lousy corporate images push those thumbs into overdrive. Grip-and-grins, large checks, giant scissors and execution-at-dawn photos are a signal that what lies beneath is pure crapola.

4. We work in silos. Will brand journalism help us tear them down?

Allow me a slight exaggeration to make a point: PR people don’t like marketers. Marketing has no use for PR. And they both ignore internal comms.

Sound familiar? Many organizations are so siloed that the teams line up like a bad community theatre production of “West Side Story.” It’s about power and influence, not collaboration, and over the years, those positions have hardened.

Turf wars are a real thing. PR owns the media, but marketing owns the web. Internal comms isn’t even in the mix.

Brand journalism attempts to change this by creating a “newsroom mentality.” At regular intervals, all
the players assemble around what we call the “News Desk” to identify hot topics, brainstorm story ideas and avoid working at cross purposes or duplicating efforts.

Marketers still market. PR people still pitch. Internal comms still connects with employees. But their efforts are shared and coordinated, in an effort to produce killer content that each team can use in its own way.

It ain’t easy, and it doesn’t always work, but you have to try. Can’t we just all get along?

5. If we do the stories ourselves, won’t news outlets stop covering us?

This is the lament of many a seasoned PR pro, and I get it. Not so many years ago, no self-respecting media organization would pick up a story from a company or industry it covers. Send us a press release, or a pitch, they’d say, and we’ll decide whether your story merits coverage.

Sadly, the news business has been decimated. There simply aren’t enough reporters and editors left to cover all the stories that deserve to be told. Your organization can no longer rely on journalists to tell its story, if it ever could.

You’ll still get coverage on the edges. If you find a cure for cancer, or if your CEO is indicted, don’t worry. The press will be there. Focus your efforts on all the great stories in between that media organizations can no longer get to.

Brand journalism delivers content directly to your audiences, through social media channels and news feeds. But it also can serve reporters by doing much of the heavy lifting for them.

You might still write press releases, though perhaps not as many. More often, you’ll pitch the actual story, not a story idea. And let’s be clear: As always, reporters can do anything they want with your content. Smaller outlets, both print and TV, might run the story verbatim (all the more reason to make it better than a release). Larger media organizations will use your story as a basis for their own coverage.
You don’t care. Your job is to get the word out, and to the broadest possible audience.

6. How do I convince my boss that brand journalism is the right way to go?

You won’t do it by making a communications argument. Promises of great stories and fabulous videos won’t convince anyone but ourselves, and we don’t need convincing.

That’s why we begin every project by working with communicators to develop the business case for brand journalism.

All but the most enlightened chiefs will be naturally suspicious. What’s wrong with what we have now? This is the way we’ve always done it. Sounds expensive.

On that last point, they’ll be right. Brand journalism will cost some money, though only a fraction of the price of your latest ad buy or IT’s newest project management software. You have to assess the current state of your communications and develop a strategy.

You may decide to reorganize your team. You may even add a staffer (hard to do, but we’ve seen it happen), or hire some freelancers. And you’ll spend money to build your news platform.

Instead, focus on brand journalism’s return on investment. Don’t over-promise; brand journalism does not guarantee higher profits or more sales. But great storytelling can have a substantial effect on other areas your leaders care about, including reputation, brand awareness, customer satisfaction, and employee recruitment and retention, among others.

Start with your organization’s top priorities and defining principles. They are often expressed as pillars or drivers depicted in some crazy Greek temple, three-legged stool or magical pyramid-type chart. Ignore those, and focus on the words.

Strategic business plans and value propositions define more than bottom-line success. They are genuine expressions of where an organization wants to go and what it aspires to be. Your job is to translate those aspirations into vivid stories—and make sure no one misses the connection.
Remember the third way: Marketing can sell the brand. PR can pitch it. Brand journalism shows it in action.

7. It all sounds great—but doesn’t this just add to our workload?

Well done! You’ve hit on the No. 1 barrier to effective brand journalism. Here’s how it generally goes: First, the communicators are really excited by the prospect of doing great stories that have real impact. Then, as we get started, they come to realize that good storytelling takes longer, and that we’ve just added to their workload without taking anything away.

Something’s got to give. Here are two ways:

Actually get rid of stuff. Start by auditing the work of the communications department. What are we producing, and how often? What’s working, and what isn’t? What stopped working a long time ago but we’re still doing, out of habit, or because some SVP expects it.

In most organizations, it’s easy to add and very hard to subtract. Comms departments are not very good at saying no. But we have to try, and metrics are the answer. Why keep doing something that no one is reading? Can we consolidate or streamline some of the busy work that clogs the pipeline? Try using a “creative brief” to slow down internal clients. Require them to articulate the strategic value of their request instead of just showing up and demanding yet another brochure or video.

Consolidate. Brand journalism is very much about efficiency. Tell a good story once and use it everywhere: for external audiences, for employees or as part of a marketing campaign. When we create once and publish everywhere, we give ourselves a little more room to breathe.

Your mantra: Do less, and do it much, much better.

Brand journalism isn’t just about changing the way you write. It’s about making a profound cultural shift in how your organization tells its story, and you need everyone to embrace the change and recognize the business reasons behind it. Brand journalism works best when its driving force comes
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from your most important audience—your own employees—who are also customers, social media producers and brand ambassadors. And it thrives when those at the top of the food chain recognize the enormous benefits of being your own publisher.

Jim Ylisela

Jim is an award-winning veteran Chicago journalist and former publisher of Ragan.com. He brings more than 30 years of experience in writing, editing, communications research and consulting and is RCG’s Co-owner & Managing Partner.

Jim designed and organized newsrooms for many organizations, including Northwestern University’s Medill graduate School of Journalism, where he served as faculty member and co-director of the Medill News Service from 1988 to 2001.

Jim is a longtime communications trainer and well-known expert in launching corporate newsrooms—both internally and externally—around the concept of brand journalism. He has launched newsrooms and trained staff at such diverse organizations as Advocate Health Care, in Chicago; Baptist Health, in Jacksonville, Florida; Denver Water; Jones Lang LaSalle, in Chicago; Omaha Public Power District; Metropolitan State University of Denver; and the University of Alberta, in Edmonton.

He has worked with communicators and news teams around the world, including Aflac, Allstate, BlackRock, GE Health, PepsiCo, Siemens and USAA, in the U.S.; Standard Chartered Bank (London), the European Investment Bank (Luxembourg), adidas (Germany), Nokia (Finland) and Saudi Aramco (Kingdom of Saudi Arabia).

Jim is the author of “Who Killed the Candy Lady?” an investigation of the disappearance and presumed murder of candy heiress Helen Brach, Chicago’s longest unsolved murder mystery. He is a lifelong and long-suffering Chicago Cubs fan—until 2016, that is, when his Cubbies won it all.
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